

**July 29, 2018**  
**John 6:1-13**  
**More than Enough**  
**Michael Stanfield**

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. <sup>2</sup>A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. <sup>3</sup>Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. <sup>4</sup>Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. <sup>5</sup>When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ <sup>6</sup>He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. <sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ <sup>8</sup>One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, <sup>9</sup>‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ <sup>10</sup>Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. <sup>11</sup>Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. <sup>12</sup>When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Bless these words on the page that they may bear witness the word you would place on our hearts this day, O Lord we pray, amen.*

Before moving here three years ago, I had lived most of my adult life in cities and towns in and around the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee. The Appalachian Mountain chain in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina is also the original home to the Cherokee. If you grow up there, you learn about the Cherokee – especially Sequoyah whose name appears on roads in neighborhoods everywhere you look. In fact, the neighborhood where I last served a church, itself was called Sequoyah Hills and the church, Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church.

Sequoyah’s life was fascinating. He was a kind of self-taught, Native American, Renaissance man. He was a gifted silversmith, a courageous soldier, a Cherokee statesman, a diplomat, not only between the US and the Cherokee but the US and Native American populations across the Southeast and the Southwest. But his greatest achievement, even though he himself was illiterate, was the independent creation of a Cherokee syllabary, making reading and writing in Cherokee possible. This feat sparked other illiterate groups around the world to do the same leading to the creation of independent syllabaries in over 65 previously illiterate languages.

Sequoyah was also a storyteller and the following is supposedly one that he was fond of telling:

An Old Cherokee medicine man, along with his protégé, was walking alone when they came to the edge of a settler’s farm. The old man halted the lad and pointed to an oak about a hundred feet from the farmer’s hen house. There sat two unlikely branch-mates – a chicken hawk and a buzzard. The man saw it as an opportunity to teach the budding young medicine man an important lesson.

He said, “See that chicken hawk. He is a skilled hunter and honored for his acrobatic feats. But observe the truth of the mountains. It is the buzzard who is the wiser. For the chicken hawk often depends too much on his own ability and is therefore impatient. His mantra is that the Great Spirit only helps those who help themselves. Yet see the buzzard. Though he is reviled for his connection to death, he is infinitely more patient, knowing in his heart that if one simply waits and watches, the Great Spirit will provide what is needed and more.”

At that a chicken strolled out of the farmer’s barn. As the chicken hawk took flight after the chicken, the Shaman said, as if speaking for the bird, “The Great Spirit only helps those who help themselves.” Well, the farmer, who evidently heard the commotion in his barn yard, came running out and immediately blasted the chicken hawk. After the farmer went back inside, The Shaman and his apprentice observed as the buzzard flew down to the dead chicken hawk lying on the ground and began to peck at the fresh carcass. Now, as if speaking for the buzzard, the old shaman said, “Indeed, the Great Spirit will provide what is needed and more.” And it wasn’t long before no less than 7 buzzards had descended and commenced their feasting.

I share this little story because it illustrates in ironic fashion the question that is at the heart of our morning text – and that is – do you operate your life more out of a mentality of the chicken hawk as in “God only helps those who help themselves” or do you operate your life more out of the mentality of the buzzard as in “God will provide”?

Our morning text is about the amazing way in which God provides for us. Like many of you this story of the feeding of the five thousand is one of the very first I remember learning in Sunday School when I was about 5 or 6 years old. It is one of the few miracle accounts of Jesus that is to be found in all four gospels. And of course, the version of this story that is taught to most children is *this* one from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John – the reason being that John adds the detail that the five loaves and two fish belonged to a little boy who, through his simple act of sharing, contributed to all those folks not going hungry that day.

In all 4 versions of this feeding of the multitudes, it is preceded by Jesus initially trying to get away from the crowds with the disciples in a boat. The reason as Matthew tells it is that Jesus has just heard of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. So Jesus is grieving and pensive. He desires to be by himself – to contemplate this set of events, to consider his journey to the cross, and to pray. But the crowd presses in and so Jesus ends up teaching all day. When it gets to be past supper time his disciples suggest that he dismiss the crowd so they can go find something to eat. This seems like a very practical and reasonable request. However, Christ’s response is a seemingly impossible expectation: “You give them something to eat.”

Here, in John’s version, Jesus assumes that he and his disciples are hosts to the people and asks his disciples to come up with the money to feed them.

Philip replies, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ All of the disciples are taken aback. “Look at all the people! All we’ve got are five loaves and two fish. We don’t have near enough! After all, we’re in the religion business, not catering. You’ve already done your job. Why don’t you just tell them to stop at a fast food place on the way home?”

“We don’t have near enough…” Aren’t we familiar with this response?

“We don’t have near enough…” It can be the response of a wife who’s trying to keep peace; to make marriage better in troubled times. She is convinced that she’s giving more than her share but the total still adds up to something that is less than satisfying for either her or her husband. They each say, “We don’t have near enough communication, or honesty, or attention, or love.”

“We don’t have near enough…” It can be the response of parents who are worried about their young children. They often have so many unknown friends, sneak peeks at shows with little or no moral center, and spend all their time on their cell phones. So parents wonder what they’re to do to counter these influences. Their cry is: “We don’t have near enough of the right kind of influences…”

“We don’t have near enough…” It can be the response of the employee whose employer never has a kind word or expression of encouragement. The employee says “I don’t have near enough other opportunities to quit this lousy job”

“We don’t have near enough…” It can be the response of many of us when age and or disability results in making our world considerably smaller. We say, “We don’t have near enough energy or mobility or memory to do much of anything anymore.”

“We don’t have near enough.” It’s the response that all of us offer when life and our responsibilities seem larger than our resources to deal with it.

And there’s the rub, isn’t it? Jesus seems to be asking for more than we have to give, as spouses, parents, residents or disciples. Jesus asks each of us to love when there is no chance that we’ll be loved back, to forgive when we’ve been hurt beyond repair, and to remain positive when the situation seems absolutely hopeless.

“Jesus, you’ve got to be kidding. The twelve of us have just a tiny bit of food.” It’s just not enough. But that is just the point: alone, on their own with the mentality of ‘God only helps those who help themselves’ which, by the way is not in the Bible despite the number of times that lazy novelists and Hollywood script writers insist that it is – with that attitude, the disciples *don’t* have enough; will never have enough. But recognition of and surrender to Christ ‘s presence allows any people gathered in his name to count on not just having enough but on having more than enough – more love, more forgiveness, more hope, more resources – more of what it takes to live faithfully, freely, gracefully, lovingly. And so:

A people gathered plus Christ always equals more than enough.

Jesus was not discouraged by the seeming lack of resources. He simply pointed out that it was almost dinnertime and that his guests would appreciate something to eat.

To me, this is the first and best example of real ministry and real mission in the whole Bible.

Far too often, we let our individual attitudes around perceived scarcity dictate our response (or lack of response) to Christ's seemingly impossible call when the only question we really need to be worried about is "What is Christ asking of us?" Not, "Do we have enough?"

In other words, "What do we believe we are really called to do?"

One day when I was going into the hospital, there was a mother and her little girl walking just ahead of me. Just before they got to the entrance, the little girl stopped and asked, "How are we going to get inside? There are no handles on those doors." The mother simply smiled and walked forward, and the electronic eye opened the door automatically and they walked in. I wonder if we don't spend too much of our time standing in front of closed doors. We stand there, thinking how impossible it will be for us to get through. But in cases like that, Jesus' advice to us is this. He says, "Step forward in faith, and trust me to do the rest."

However, it's not just about "Jesus and me against the world." either – because an attitude of Jesus plus me against the world has only proven time and time again to create nothing but conflict and pain. Remember: it's a people gathered plus Christ that always equals more than enough.

It's when Jesus is present in the gathered community with all of us recognizing and paying attention both to him and to each other that we can be patient and discover that we have more than enough. The troubled couple, parent, employee, assisted living resident, or church member is not alone with their seemingly meager resources. The miracle of plenty happens when I realize that it's not just about me and what *I* can or can't provide, but about how through faith, together we might rediscover that we have way more than enough.

Albert Einstein famously said, "The way I see it you have two ways to live your life: the one as if no miracles exist and the other as though everything is a miracle."

But, of course, this begs the question, "What is a miracle?"

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that when the meager basket of bread and fish was passed among the people they dug into their pockets to add the secret bit of bread and fish that they had brought along for the journey. By the time the baskets had been passed around, the people had taken enough to eat but also put a little back in to share with others because that seemed like the only right thing to do. If this is so, does it make what happened any less of a miracle than if the bread and fish were supernaturally transformed?

What matters is that the gospel tells us when the faithful begin to act with faith, putting all of their resources together, miraculous things begin to happen. When we trust in God, and act with compassion, scarcity is transformed into abundance. We have more than enough.

Many visitors to Pennsylvania Dutch Country stop at one of the "family style" restaurants that operate in the Amish tradition. Those who do so are often surprised to find themselves seated not at a small table with only those people they've come in with, but with complete strangers. Side dishes are delivered not in little individual dishes, but in huge, steaming portions in communal bowls.

This arrangement forces strangers to talk to one another, and as they do, they frequently find they have much in common. Before they know it, they're laughing, sharing jokes and stories and generally having a great time.

Suddenly, it becomes less about filling my individual belly and more about the miracle of intimacy with strangers. Jesus and his disciples found this to be true on that hillside by the Sea of Galilee where he fed a multitude.

One thing is for certain: Jesus' miracle on the hillside is about more than loaves and fishes – a lot more.

His apparent insensitive demand of his disciples actually reveals his confidence in them. Hence, this story is good news for us weary disciples who find the demands of life and ministry overwhelming. We are confronted by an impossible expectation (“You buy them something to eat”), but we are supported by the promise of more than enough when we trust Christ and band together with others who are attempting to be faithful as well.

“Bring what you *do* have to me.” That's what Jesus says in the passage. And that's the antidote – the antidote for when we feel small, ill equipped, or overwhelmed by the tasks before us. “Bring to me what you do have and I will make it more than adequate for not just what you need but for what the world needs.”

So I ask you what is it that you have facing you today? What need has Jesus brought to your attention with which you are now struggling? What resources do you have to meet that need? As we all gather this morning, Jesus says simply, “Bring me what you have and let's share it. If we do, it will have more than enough of what we need for the journey ahead.”

Let us Pray: Gracious lord, we confess that we are a people more akin to the chicken hawk who believe that if we don't help ourselves, help won't come. Help us to be more like the buzzard, trusting that our help comes from you, who made heaven and earth.

And now bless these meager offerings that they may indeed feed thousands – not with the bread that perishes but the bread that gives life – your body. Amen